LIVING PLANET REPORT 2020

AN SOS FOR NATURE

We are in a state of planetary emergency that requires an urgent, ambitious and comprehensive response. Science warns us that biodiversity loss and climate change are accelerating in an unprecedented way. The 2020 Living Planet Index shows an average 68% decline in mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish in less than half a century. Humanity’s increasing destruction of nature is having catastrophic impacts not only on wildlife populations but also on human health and all aspects of our lives. COVID-19 is just one example which has had dramatic impacts not only through the loss of numerous lives and on health but across all economic and social spheres of society.

WHAT ARE THE ROOT CAUSES OF NATURE’S DECLINE?

In the last 50 years our world has been transformed by an explosion in global trade, consumption and human population growth, as well as an enormous move towards urbanisation. We know that 75 percent of the Earth’s ice-free land surface has been significantly altered by humans. Land use change due to deforestation and conversion for agriculture is the most important direct cause of biodiversity loss in terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, while climate change, overexploitation, pollution and invasive species are also significant contributors. Land conversion for agriculture has caused 70% of global biodiversity loss and half of all tree cover loss, and of the total amount of water withdrawn from available freshwater resources, 75% is used for crops or livestock. In marine ecosystems, overfishing has had the largest relative impact, followed by land-/sea-use change, such as coastal development and pollution, and climate change will continue to cause a growing spectrum of effects across marine ecosystems.
WHY DOES NATURE MATTER?

The interdependent crises of biodiversity loss, climate change and the pandemic are worsening poverty, inequalities and food security, putting livelihoods at risk, jeopardising our opportunity for sustainable and equitable development and achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They hit the most vulnerable hardest, while impacting all of us and our daily lives in diverse ways, through changing weather patterns, economic concerns, risks of serious illness and even loss of life.

Nature provides solutions. It underpins human health, wellbeing and prosperity. Protecting and restoring biodiversity and well-functioning ecosystems is crucial to boost our resilience to natural and human-induced disasters. We know that half of the world’s GDP depends on nature, and is potentially at risk as a result of biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse. Yet we are not valuing nature or factoring its services into decision-making. For example, the economic return from investing in the rebuilding of marine life by 2050 will be considerable, around US$10 per US$1 invested and in excess of one million new jobs.
**IMAGINING A ROAD MAP FOR PEOPLE AND NATURE**

Pioneering new modelling has provided the first ‘proof of concept’ that we can halt, and reverse, terrestrial biodiversity loss caused by land-use change, whilst feeding a growing population. In order to achieve this, conservation action and the transformation of our food production and consumption patterns must go hand in hand.

Bolder, more ambitious conservation efforts (e.g. increasing the extent and improving the management of protected areas, and increasing restoration and landscape-level conservation planning) are key to bending the curve of biodiversity loss. More than any other single type of action, increased conservation was found to limit further biodiversity losses in the future and to set global biodiversity trends on a recovery trajectory.

However, conservation efforts alone will not reverse the loss of nature. Systemic change is urgently needed. The main cause of the dramatic decline in species’ populations on land observed in the Living Planet Index is habitat loss and degradation, including deforestation, primarily driven by how we produce and consume our food. To address this will require halving the footprint of production and consumption through the transformation of our food and agricultural systems, for example by reducing waste of agricultural goods from field to fork and shifting diets to a lower share of animal calories in high meat consuming countries. Other productive sectors, including forestry, fisheries, infrastructure and energy, extractives and manufacturing will need to transform as well. These transformations need to be just - costs and benefits need to be shared fairly and equitably - and they need to take place urgently, to limit risks of more and irreversible damage (e.g. species extinction, new pandemics) and higher restoration costs.

“IT IS NOW MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER TO TAKE UNPRECEDENTED AND COORDINATED GLOBAL ACTION TO HALT AND START TO REVERSE THE LOSS OF BIODIVERSITY AND WILDLIFE POPULATIONS ACROSS THE GLOBE BY THE END OF THE DECADE”

Marco Lambertini, Director General, WWF International

Bending the curve of terrestrial biodiversity needs an integrated strategy. D. Leclère et al.
The new modelling clearly spells out what needs to be done to bend the curve of nature loss, moving towards a world that is nature-positive. The modelling also tells us that it can be done. In response, we must make the end of 2020 and the coming year the year for change; a time for ambition and decisive action before it is too late, marking the start of the Decade of Action for Sustainable Development, the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.

Starting with the UN Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020, and with the Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) and the Food Systems Summit all taking place in 2021, the world has a unique opportunity to agree on an ambitious and integrated set of transformative actions to set nature on the path to recovery by 2030, in support of climate action and the Sustainable Development Goals. Strong decisions must be accompanied by a green and just economic recovery from the impacts of the current pandemic. Together, we can address the planetary emergency and secure an equitable, carbon-neutral and nature-positive world that safeguards both human and planetary health.

**WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH WITH SECTOR-SPECIFIC ACTION**

We need leadership at the highest level of state or government to foster the integrated or ‘whole-of-government’ approach that is required to address the planetary emergency. All government ministries need to unite with the Ministry of Environment, behind ambitious commitments to address the drivers of biodiversity loss and decrease our ecological footprint. Sectors driving biodiversity loss, including the agriculture and food sectors; forestry; fisheries; infrastructure; mining and extractives, as well as the financial sector, need to transform and develop action plans to innovate and transition to nature-positive, carbon-neutral and equitable practices if we are to avoid a significant increase in financial, health and disaster risks. For example:

- Heads of State and government need to provide leadership, commitment and oversight at the highest level for a whole-of-government approach to work and for decisions to be nature-positive and aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

- Ministers of Environment need to play a key role in ensuring their governments agree to
and maintain the level of ambition and actions that are needed to reverse nature loss, and that actions are ratcheted up when required. They also need to ensure these national ambitions and actions contribute to and are embedded in global collective efforts, such as the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

- Ministers of Planning and Development need to ensure that biodiversity action is integrated into national development plans.

- Ministers of Finance and Economy need to reform the financial sector to align financial flows with the goal of a nature-positive, carbon neutral and equitable world by 2030. This includes eliminating or repurposing incentives, including subsidies, that are harmful to biodiversity. They must also adopt green and just recovery plans, which respond to economic and environmental challenges by speeding up the transition to a green and circular economy.

- Ministers of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry; Ministers of Industry and Trade; Ministers of Climate and Energy must develop and implement sector-specific national, regional and global plans of action for food and agriculture, forestry, fisheries, infrastructure and energy, extractives and manufacturing sectors to transition to sustainable consumption and production and a circular economy that operates within planetary boundaries and to apply nature-based solutions to societal challenges.

- Ministers of Health must link the health of humans, animals and our shared environment through interventions which address nature exploitation and destruction. This is in order to reduce the risk of zoonotic infectious diseases and their negative impacts on human health and livelihoods and which promote sustainable diets with foods that contribute to human and planetary health.

- Ministers of Foreign Affairs must engage in regional and international collaboration (including trade) to address biodiversity loss as a transboundary and international issue, meet commitments for official development assistance, which forms a crucial component of the funding needed by developing countries to halt and reverse nature loss, and address loss of natural resources as a security issue, since this can lead to conflict and displacement of people.

Effective design and implementation of nature-positive policies does not only require a whole-of-government approach, but also the full participation and ownership of civil society – including Indigenous Peoples and local communities, women and girls and youth. Recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples to their lands and resources is also essential to ensure better outcomes for people and the planet.

**ROLE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIFFERENT GLOBAL AGREEMENTS AND PROCESSES.**

The current planetary emergency requires a multilateral response: ecosystems and species know no boundaries; nature’s benefits are shared across countries; and the drivers of biodiversity loss are global challenges. Commitments and actions at national level need to be embedded in and complemented with multilateral agreements that are ambitious, transformative and joined up.

Countries have a unique opportunity to address the planetary emergency and commit to ambitious action on biodiversity at the UN Summit on Biodiversity in September 2020, to be translated in 2021 into an ambitious and transformative post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework that aims to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030 and that has strong and transparent implementation and accountability mechanisms.
ALSO IN 2021

• The Food Systems summit provides an opportunity to agree on transforming our food systems;

• The UNFCCC COP26 provides an opportunity for countries to set out more ambitious climate goals towards halving global emissions by 2030 and reaching net zero by 2050.

• The UNCCD COP15 provides an opportunity to renew efforts to achieve land degradation neutrality;

• The G7 and G20 summits will be critical moments to engage other sectors;

• Some SDG targets have a 2020 end date, several of which are environmental targets. During the 2019 SDG Summit, UN member states committed to ensure ambitious and continuous action on these targets. The Member States now need to translate this commitment into a decision.

• UN member states need to act on their commitment (from the 2019 SDG Summit) to address the SDG targets with a 2020 end date. Several of these targets are biodiversity-related, and closely linked with the negotiations of the Global Biodiversity Framework.

Commitments and agreements made in the coming year will set the stage for Stockholm+50 in 2022 to assess progress and fill gaps in addressing the planetary emergency.

Humanity needs to act now and to act collectively to reduce financial, health and disaster risks, and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Science and inspiring examples tell us that we can reverse the loss of nature toward a nature-positive future if we put the right policies and actions in place. For this, we’ll need strong political leadership and determination, as well as concrete and solid actions in countries and on the ground to bring the changes that we need for a carbon neutral, nature positive and equable future.